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NEW YORK: SOCIAL NOTES.—I.

BY HENRY JAMES.

I.

WERE I not afraid of appearing to strike to excess the so-called pessimistic note, I should really make much of the interesting, appealing, touching vision of waste—I know not how else to name it—that flung its odd melancholy mantle even over one's walks through the parts of the town supposedly noblest and fairest. For it proceeded, the vision, I think, from a source or two still deeper than the most obvious, the constant shocked sense of houses and rows, of recent expensive construction (that had cost thought as well as money, that had taken birth presumably as a *serious* demonstration, and that were thereby just beginning to live into history) marked for removal, for extinction, in their prime, and awaiting it with their handsome faces so fresh and yet so wan and so anxious. The most tragic element in the French Revolution, and thence surely the most tragic in human annals, was the so frequent case of the very young sent to the scaffold—the youths and maidens, all bewildered and stainless, lately born into a world decked for them socially with flowers, and for whom, none the less, suddenly, the horror of horrors uprose. They were literally the victims I thought of, absurd as it may seem, under the shock in question; in spite of which, however, even this is not what I mean by my impression of the squandered effort. I have had occasion to speak—and one can only speak with sympathy—of the really human, the communicative, side of that vivid show of a society trying to build itself, with every elaboration, into some coherent sense *of* itself, and literally putting forth interrogative feelers, as it goes, into the ambient air; literally reaching out (say, to the charmed beholder) for some measure and some test of its success. This

effect of certain of the manifestations of wealth in New York is, so far as I know, unique: nowhere else does pecuniary power so beat its wings in the void, and so look round it for the charity of some hint as to the possible awkwardness or possible grace of its motion, some sign of whether it be flying, for good taste, too high or too low. In the other American cities, on the one hand, the flights are as yet less numerous—though already promising no small diversion; and amid the older congregations of men, in the proportionately rich cities of Europe, on the other hand, good taste is present, for reference and comparison, in a hundred embodied and consecrated forms. Which is why, to repeat, I found myself recognizing in the New York predicament a particular character and a particular pathos. The whole costly up-town demonstration was a record, in the last analysis, of individual loneliness; whence came, precisely, its insistent testimony to waste—waste of the still wider sort than the mere game of rebuilding.

That quite different admonition of the general European spectacle, the effect, in the picture of things, as of a large, consummate economy, traditionally practised, springs from the fact that old societies, old, and even new, aristocracies, are arranged exactly to supply functions, forms, the whole element of custom and perpetuity, to any massiveness of private ease, however great. Massive private ease attended with no force of assertion beyond the hour is an anomaly rarely encountered, therefore, in countries where the social arrangements strike one as undertaking, by their very nature and pretension, to make the future as interesting as the past. These conditions, the romantic ones for the picture-seeker, are generally menaced, one is reminded; they tend to alter everywhere, partly by the very force of the American example, and it may be said that in France, for instance, they have done nothing but alter for a hundred years. It none the less remains true that for once that we ask ourselves “in Europe” what is going to become of a given piece of property, whether family “situation,” or else palace, castle, picture, *parure*, other attribute of wealth, we indulge in the question twenty times in the United States—so scant an engagement does the visible order strike us as taking to provide for it. There comes in the note of loneliness on the part of these loose values—deep as the look in the eyes of dogs who plead against a change

of masters. The visible order among ourselves undertakes at the most that they shall change hands, and the meagreness and indignity of this doom affect them as a betrayal just in proportion as they have grown great. Uppermost Fifth Avenue, for example, is lined with dwellings the very intention both of the spread and of the finish of which would seem to be to imply that they are "entailed" as majestically as red tape can entail them. But we know how little they enjoy any such courtesy or security; and, but for our tender heart and our charming imagination, we would blight them in their bloom with our restless analysis. "It's all very well for you to look as if, since you've had no past, you're going in, as the next best thing, for a magnificent compensatory future. What are you going to make your future *of*, for all your airs, we want to know?—what elements of a future, as futures have gone in the great world, are at all assured to you? Do what you will, you sit here only in the lurid light of 'business,' and you know, without our reminding you, what guarantees, what majestic continuity and heredity, *that* represents. Where are not only your eldest son and *his* eldest son, those prime indispensables for any real *projection* of your estate, unable as they would be to get rid of you even if they should wish; but where even is the old family stocking, properly stuffed and hanging so heavy as not to stir, some dreadful day, in the cold breath of Wall Street? No, what you are reduced to for 'importance' is the present, pure and simple, squaring itself between an absent future and an absent past as solidly as it can. You overdo it for what you are—you overdo it still more for what you may be; and don't pretend, above all, with the object-lesson supplied you, close at hand, by the queer case of Newport, don't pretend, we say, not to know what we mean."

"We say," I put it, but the point is that we say nothing, and it is that very small matter of Newport exactly that keeps us compassionately silent. The present state of Newport shall be a chapter by itself, which I long to take in hand, but which must wait its turn; so that I may mention it here only for the supreme support it gives to this reading of the conditions of New York opulence. The show of the case to-day—oh, so vividly and pathetically!—is that New York and other opulence, creating the place, for a series of years, as part of the effort of "American society" to find out, by experiment, what it would be at,

now has no further use for it—has only learned from it, at an immense expenditure, how to get rid of an illusion. “We’ve found out, after all, (since it’s a question of what we would be ‘at’) that we wouldn’t be at Newport—if we can possibly be anywhere else; which, with our means, we indubitably *can* be: so that we leave poor dear Newport just ruefully to show it.” That remark is written now over the face of the scene, and I can think nowhere of a mistake confessed to so promptly, yet in terms so exquisite, so charmingly cynical; the terms of beautiful houses and delicate grounds closed, condemned and forsaken, yet so “kept up,” at the same time, as to cover the retreat of their projectors. The very air and light, soft and discreet, seem to speak, in tactful fashion, for people who would be embarrassed to be there—as if it might shame them to see it proved against them that they could once have been so artless and so bourgeois. The point is that they have learned not to be, by the rather terrible process of exhausting the list of mistakes. Newport, for them—or for us others—is only one of these mistakes; and we feel no confidence that the pompous New York houses, most of them so flagrantly tentative, and tentative only, bristling with friezes and pinnacles, but discernibly deficient in reasons, shall not collectively form another. It is the hard fate of new aristocracies that the element of error, with them, has to be contemporary—not relegated to the dimness of the past, but receiving the full modern glare, a light fatal to the fond theory that the best society, everywhere, has grown, in all sorts of ways, in spite of itself. We see it in New York trying, trying its very hardest, to grow, yet not knowing (by so many indications) what to grow *on*.

There comes back to me again and again, for many reasons, a particular impression of this interesting struggle in the void—a constituted image of the upper social organism floundering there all helplessly, more or less floated by its immense good-will and the splendor of its immediate environment, but betrayed by its paucity of real resource. The occasion I allude to was simply a dinner-party, of the most genial intention, but at which the note of high ornament, of the general uplifted situation, was so consistently struck that it presented itself, on the page of New York life, as a purple patch without a possible context—as consciously, almost painfully, unaccompanied by passages in any-

thing like the same key. The scene of our feast was a palace and the perfection of setting and service absolute; the ladies, beautiful, gracious and glittering with gems, were in tiaras and a semblance of court trains, a sort of prescribed official magnificence; but it was impossible not to ask one's self with what, in the wide American frame, such great matters might be supposed to consort or to rhyme. The material pitch was so high that it carried with it really no social sequence, no application, and that, as a tribute to the ideal, to the exquisite, it wanted company, support, some sort of consecration. The difficulty, the irony, of the hour was that so many of the implications of completeness, that is of a sustaining social order, were absent. There was nothing for us to do, at eleven o'clock—or for the ladies at least—but to scatter and go to bed. There was nothing, as in London or in Paris, to go “on” to; the going “on” is, for the New York aspiration, always the stumbling-block. A great court-function would alone have met the strain, met the terms of the case—would alone properly have crowned the hour. When I speak of the terms of the case, I must remind myself indeed that they were not all of one complexion; which is but another sign, however, of the inevitable jaggedness of the purple patch in great commercial democracies. The high color required could be drawn in abundance from the ladies, but in a very minor degree, one easily perceived, from the men. The impression was singular, but it was there: had there been a court-function the ladies must have gone on to it alone, trusting to have the proper partners and mates supplied them on the premises—supplied, say, with the checks for recovery of their cloaks. The high pitch, all the exalted reference, was of the palatial house, the would-be harmonious women, the tiaras and the trains; it was not of the amiable gentlemen, delightful in their way, in whose so often quaint presence, yet without whose immediate aid, the effort of American society to arrive at the “best” consciousness goes forward.

This failure of the sexes to keep step socially is to be noted, in the United States, at every turn, and is perhaps more suggestive of interesting “drama,” as I have already hinted, than anything else in the country. But it illustrates further that foredoomed *grobe* of wealth, in the conquest of the amenities—the strange necessity under which the social interest labors of find-

ing out for itself, as a preliminary, what civilization really *is*. If the men are not to be taken as contributing to it, but only the women, what new case is *that*, under the sun, and under what strange aggravations of difficulty therefore is the problem not presented? We should call any such treatment of a different order of question the empirical treatment—the limitations and aberrations of which crop up, for the restless analyst, in the most illustrative way. Its presence is felt unmistakably, for instance, in the general extravagant insistence on the Opera, which plays its part as the great vessel of social salvation, the comprehensive substitute for all other conceivable vessels; the *whole* social consciousness thus clambering into it, under stress, as the whole community crams into the other public receptacles, the desperate cars of the Subway or the vast elevators of the tall buildings. The Opera, indeed, as New York enjoys it, one promptly perceives, is worthy, musically and picturesquely, of its immense function; the effect of it is splendid, but one has none the less the oddest sense of hearing it, as an institution, groan and creak, positively almost split and crack, with the extra weight thrown upon it—the weight that in worlds otherwise arranged is artfully scattered, distributed over all the ground. In default of a court-function, our ladies of the tiaras and court trains might have gone on to the opera-function, these occasions offering the only approach to the implication of the tiara known, so to speak, to the American law. Yet even here there would have been no one for them, in congruity and consistency, to curtsy to—their only possible course becoming thus, it would seem, to make obeisance, clingly, to each other. This truth points again the effect of a picture poor in the male presence; for to what male presence of native growth is it thinkable that the wearer of an American tiara *should* curtsy? Such a vision gives the measure of the degree in which we see the social empiricism in question putting, perforce, the cart before the horse. In worlds otherwise arranged, besides there being, always, plenty of subjects for genuflexion, the occasion itself, with its character fully turned on, produces the tiara. In New York this symbol has, by an arduous extension of its virtue, to produce the occasion.

I found it interesting to note, I may add, that the very Clubs, on whose behalf, if anywhere, expert tradition might have operated, betrayed with a *bonhomie* touching in the midst of their

magnificence the empirical character. Was not their admirable, their unique, hospitality, for that matter, an empirical note—a departure from the consecrated collective egoism governing such institutions in worlds, as I have said, otherwise arranged? Let the hospitality, in this case at least, stand for the prospective discovery of a new and better law, under which the consecrated egoism itself will have become the “provincial” sign. Endless at all events, the power of one or two of these splendid structures to testify to the state of manners—of manners undiscourageably seeking the superior stable equilibrium. There had remained with me as illuminating, from years before, the confidential word of a friend on whom, after a long absence from New York, the privilege of one of the largest clubs had been conferred. “The place is a palace, for scale and decoration, but there is only one kind of letter-paper.” There would be more kinds of letter-paper now, I take it—though the American club struck me everywhere, oddly, considering the busy people that employ it, as much less an institution for attending to one’s correspondence than others I had had knowledge of; generally destitute, in fact, of copious and various appliances for that purpose. There is such a thing as the imagination of the writing-table, and I nowhere, save in a few private houses, came upon its fruits; to which I must add that this is the one connection in which the provision for ease has not an extraordinary amplitude, an amplitude unequalled anywhere else. One emphatic reservation, throughout the country, the restored absentee finds himself continually making, but the universal custom of the house with almost no one of its indoor parts distinguishable from any other is an affliction against which he has to learn betimes to brace himself. This diffused vagueness of separation between apartments, between hall and room, between one room and another, between the one you are in and the one you are not in, between place of passage and place of privacy, is a provocation to despair which the public institution shares impartially with the luxurious “home.” To the spirit attuned to a different practice these dispositions can only appear a strange perversity, an extravagant aberration of taste; but I may here touch on them scarce further than to mark their value for the characterization of manners.

They testify at every turn, then, to those of the American people, to the prevailing “conception of life”; they correspond,

withindoors, to the as inveterate suppression of almost every outward exclusory arrangement. The instinct is throughout, as we catch it at play, that of minimizing, for any "interior," the guilt or odium or responsibility, whatever these may appear, of its *being* an interior. The custom rages like a conspiracy for nipping the interior in the bud, for denying its right to exist, for ignoring and defeating it in every possible way, for wiping out successively each sign by which it may be known from an *exterior*. The effacement of the difference has been marvellously, triumphantly, brought about; and, with all the ingenuity of young, fresh, frolicsome architecture aiding and abetting, has been made to flourish, alike in the small structure and the great, as the very law of the structural fact. Thus we have the law fulfilled that every part of every house shall be, as nearly as may be, visible, visitable, penetrable, not only from every other part, but from as many parts of as many other houses as possible, if they only be near enough. Thus we see systematized the indefinite extension of all spaces and the definite merging of all functions; the enlargement of every opening, the exaggeration of every passage, the substitution of gaping arches and far perspectives and resounding voids for enclosing walls, for practicable doors, for controllable windows, for all the rest of the essence of the room-character, that room-suggestion which is so indispensable not only to occupation and concentration, but to conversation itself, to the play of the social relation at any other pitch than the pitch of a shriek or a shout. This comprehensive canon has so succeeded in imposing itself that it strikes you as reflecting inordinately, as positively serving you up for convenient inspection, under a clear glass cover, the social tone that has dictated it. But I must confine myself to recording, for the moment, that it takes a whole new discipline to put the visitor at his ease in so merciless a medium; he finds himself looking round for a background or a limit, some localizing fact or two, in the interest of talk, of that "good" talk which always falters before the complete proscription of privacy. He sees only doorless apertures, vainly festooned, which decline to tell him where he is, which make him still a homeless wanderer, which show him other apertures, corridors, staircases, yawning, expanding, ascending, descending, and all as for the purpose of giving his presence "away," of reminding him that what he says must be

said for the house. He is beguiled in a measure by reading into these phenomena, ever so sharply, the reason of many another impression; he is beguiled by remembering how many of the things said in America *are* said for the house; so that if all that he wants is to keep catching the finer harmony of effect and cause, of explanation and implication, the cup of his perception is full to overflowing.

That satisfaction does represent, certainly, much of his quest; all the more that what he misses, in the place—the comfort and support, for instance, of windows, porches, verandas, lawns, gardens, “grounds,” that, by not taking the whole world into their confidence, have not the whole world’s confidence to take in return—ranges itself for him in that large body of American idiosyncrasy which contains, unmistakably, a precious principle of future reaction. The desire to rake and be raked has, doubtless, he makes out, a long day before it still; but there are too many reasons why it should not be the last word of *any* social evolution—the social idea has too inevitably secrets in store, quite other constructive principles, quite other refinements on the idea of intercourse, with which it must eventually reckon. It will be certain at a given moment, I think, to head in a different direction altogether; though, obviously, many other remarkable things, changes of ideal, of habit, of key, will have to take place first. The conception of the home, and *a fortiori* of the club, as a combination of the hall of echoes and the toy “transparency” held against the light, will meanwhile sufficiently prevail to have made my reference to it not quite futile. Yet I must after all remember that the reservation on the ground of comfort to which I just alluded applies with its smallest force to the interchangeability of club-compartments, to the omnipresence of the majestic open arch in club conditions. Such conditions more or less prescribe that feature, and criticism begins only when private houses emulate the form of clubs. What I had mainly in mind was another of these so inexhaustible values of my subject; with which the question of rigor of comfort has nothing to do. I cherish certain remembered aspects for their general vivid eloquence—for the sake of my impression of the type of great generous club-establishments in which the “empiricism” of that already-observed idea of the conquest of splendor could richly and irresponsibly flower. It is of extreme

interest to be reminded, at many a turn of such an exhibition, that it takes an endless amount of history to make even a little tradition, and an endless amount of tradition to make even a little taste, and an endless amount of taste, by the same token, to make even a little tranquillity. Tranquillity results, largely, from taste tactfully applied, taste lighted above all by experience and possessed of a clue for its labyrinth. There is no such clue, for club-felicity, as some view of congruities and harmonies, completeness of correspondence between aspects and uses. A sense for that completeness is a thing of slow growth, one of the flowers of tradition precisely; of the good conservative tradition that walks apart from the extravagant use of money and the unregulated appeal to "style"—passes in fact, at its best, quite on the other side of the way. This discrimination occurs, when the ground has the good fortune to be already held by some definite, some transmitted, conception of the adornments and enhancements that consort, and that do not consort, with the presence, the habits, the tone, of lounging, gossiping, smoking, newspaper-reading, bridge-playing, cocktail-imbibing men. The club-developments of New York read here and there the lesson of the strange deserts in which the appeal to style may lose itself, may wildly and wantonly stray, without a certain light of fine old gentlemanly prejudice to guide it.

II.

But I should omit half my small story were I not meanwhile to make due record of the numerous hours at which one ceased consciously to discriminate, just suffering one's sense to be flooded with the large clean light and with that suggestion of a crowded "party" of young persons which lurked in the general aspect of the handsomer regions—a great circle of brilliant and dowered débutantes and impatient youths, expert in the cotillion, waiting together for the first bars of some wonderful imminent dance-music, something "wilder" than any ever yet. It is such a wait for something more, these innocents scarce know what, it is this, distinctly, that the upper New York picture seems to cause to play before us; but the wait is just that collective alertness of bright-eyed, light-limbed, clear-voiced youth, without a doubt in the world and without a conviction; which last, however, always, may perfectly be absent without prejudice to confi-

dence. The confidence and the innocence are those of children whose world has ever been practically a safe one, and the party so imaged is thus really even a child's party, enormously attended, but in which the united ages of the company make up no formidable sum. In the light of that analogy, the New York social movement of the day, I think, always shines—as the whole show of the so-called social life of the country does, for that matter; since it comes home to the restless analyst everywhere that this “childish” explanation is the one that meets the greatest number of the social appearances. To arrive—and with tolerable promptitude—at that generalization is to find it, right and left, immensely convenient, and thereby quite to cling to it: the newspapers alone, for instance, doing so much to feed it, from day to day, as with their huge playfully brandished wooden spoon. We seem at moments to see the incoherence and volatility of childhood, its living but in the sense of its hour and in the immediacy of its want, its instinctive refusal to be brought to book, its boundless liability to contagion and boundless incapacity for attention, its ingenuous blankness to-day over the appetites and clamors of yesterday, its chronic state of besprinklement with the sawdust of its ripped-up dolls, which it scarce goes even through the form of shaking out of its hair—we seem at moments to see these things, I say, twinkle in the very air, as by reflection of the movement of a great, sunny playroom floor. The immensity of the native accommodation, socially speaking, for the childish life, is not that exactly the key of much of the spectacle?—the safety of the vast flat expanse where every margin abounds and nothing too untoward need happen. The question is interesting, but I remember quickly that I am concerned with it only so far as it is part of the light of New York.

It appeared at all events, on the late days of spring, just a response to the facility of things and so much of their juvenile pleasantries, to find one's self “liking,” without more ado, and very much even at the risk of one's life, the heterogeneous, miscellaneous apology for a Square marking the spot at which the main entrance, as I suppose it may be called, to the Park opens toward Fifth Avenue; opens toward the glittering monument to Sherman, toward the most death-dealing, perhaps, of all the climaxes of electric car cross-currents, toward the loosest of all the loose distributions of the overtopping “apartment” and other

hotels, toward the most jovial of all the sacrifices of preconsidered composition, toward the finest of all the reckless revelations, in short, of the brave New York humor. The best thing in the picture, obviously, is Saint Gaudens's great group, splendid in its golden elegance and doing more for the scene (by thus giving the beholder a point of such dignity for his orientation) than all its other elements together. Strange and seductive for any lover of the reasons of things this inordinate value, on the spot, of the dauntless refinement of the Sherman image; the comparative vulgarity of the environment drinking it up, on one side, like an insatiable sponge, and yet failing at the same time sensibly to impair its virtue. The refinement prevails and, as it were, succeeds; holds its own in the medley of accidents, where nothing else is refined, unless it be the amplitude of the "quiet" note in the front of the Metropolitan Club, amuses itself, in short, with being as extravagantly "intellectual" as it likes. Why, therefore, given the surrounding medium, does it so triumphantly impose itself, and impose itself not insidiously and gradually, but immediately and with force? Why does it not pay the penalty of expressing an idea and being founded on one?—such scant impunity seeming usually to be enjoyed among us, at this hour, by any artistic intention of the finer strain? But I put these questions only to give them up—for what I feel beyond anything else is that Mr. Saint Gaudens somehow takes care of himself.

To what measureless extent he does this on occasion one was to learn, in due course, from his magnificent Lincoln at Chicago—the lesson there being simply that of a mystery exquisite, the absolute inscrutable; one of the happiest cases known to our time, known doubtless to any time, of the combination of intensity of effect with dissimulation, with deep disavowal, of process. After seeing the Lincoln one consents for its author, to the drop of questions—that is the lame truth; a truth in the absence of which I should have risked another word or two, have addressed perhaps even a brief challenge to a certain ambiguity in the Sherman. Its idea, to which I have alluded, strikes me as equivocal, or more exactly as double; the image being, on the one side, and splendidly rendered, that of an overwhelming military Advance, an irresistible march into an Enemy's country—the strain forward, the very inflation of drapery with the rush, sym-

bolizing the very breath of the Destroyer. But the idea is at the same time—which part of it is also admirably expressed—that the Destroyer is a messenger of peace, with the olive branch too waved in the blast, and with embodied grace, in the form of a beautiful American Girl, attending his business. And I confess to a lapse of satisfaction in the presence of this interweaving—the result doubtless of a sharp suspicion of all attempts, however glittering and golden, to confound destroyers with benefactors. The military monument in the city square responds evidently, wherever a pretext can be found for it, to a desire of men's hearts; but I would have it always as military as possible, and I would have the Destroyer, in intention at least, not docked of one of his bristles. I would have him deadly and terrible, and, if he be wanted beautiful, beautiful only as a war god and crested not with peace, but with snakes. Peace is a long way round from him, and blood and ashes in between. So, with a less intimate perversity, I think, than that of Mr. Saint Gaudens's brilliant scheme, I would have had a Sherman of the terrible March (the "immortal" march, in all abundance, if that be the needed note), not irradiating benevolence, but signifying, by every ingenious device, the misery, the ruin and the vengeance of his track. It is not one's affair to attempt to teach an artist how such horrors may *be* monumentally signified; it is enough that their having been perpetrated is the very ground of the monument. And monuments should always have a clean, clear meaning.

HENRY JAMES.

(To be continued.)